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The proposed natural gas Atlantic Coast Pipeline route through North Carolina. Chris Seward
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Editorials

The Atlantic Coast Pipeline will slow conversion to more renewable energy

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The Atlantic Coast Pipeline is being touted as a vital supply line for economic development in eastern North Carolina, but it also would contribute to a major threat to the flood-prone region by exacerbating climate change.

The 600-mile natural gas pipeline is planned to run from West Virginia's natural gas fields through Virginia and North Carolina. The \$6 billion project backed by Charlotte-based Duke Energy and Richmond-based Dominion Resources is moving steadily through a thicket of federal and state requirements and its developers expect to complete the permitting process by mid-

December. But [disputes over access](#) to local property and legal objections from environmental groups could still stall the massive tree cutting, tunneling and trenching needed for the pipeline.

Such obstacles may be temporary given the resources and political clout of the developers, but they are necessary and welcome. The Federal Energy Regulatory Commission failed to allow for a full public assessment of the pipeline before it granted approval. Appeals of that decision by various environmental and consumer advocacy groups will buy time for a fuller assessment of the need for the pipeline, its impact on the land and waterways and the risks it poses to residents who would live near it.

These practical and immediate concerns need to be addressed, but the overarching reason to oppose a new pipeline that would carry 1.5 billion cubic feet of natural gas a day is that it takes North Carolina's and the nation's energy development in exactly the wrong direction. Money should be poured into the development of renewable energy and the generation of power on site rather than into the pumping in of fossil fuel from hundreds of miles away.

Methane hazards

Representatives of Duke Energy and Dominion Resources acknowledge the need to reduce carbon emissions and say their companies are doing so. They note that coal-fired power plants have been converted to facilities fueled by cleaner burning natural gas, and Duke Energy has made large investments in solar power.

That's fine, but it's hardly enough. Natural gas is a cleaner source, but extracting it through hydraulic fracturing leads to extensive leaks of methane, a far more potent heat-trapping gas than the carbon dioxide that coal plants emit. And while Duke has invested in solar power, renewable energy provides only a small fraction of its overall power generation. Allowing Duke to tap into a huge new supply of natural gas with the costs passed on to ratepayers will only increase the utility's dependence on natural gas when it should be weaning itself off fossil fuels.

FERC is contributing to this backward path in energy development by allowing rates of return up to 14 percent on the construction of gas pipelines. That means ratepayers could be paying not only for the natural gas, but also for the pipeline that carries it. That makes building the ACP pipeline more attractive to utility shareholders, but it could make ACP gas [more expensive](#) than gas from existing pipelines.

Delaying conversion

Representatives of Duke Energy and Dominion Resources are pushing the pipeline as a tool for economic development in economically struggling parts of eastern North Carolina. But so far the main customer for the gas in North Carolina would be Duke power plants. By 2032, Duke projects the need for eight additional power plants fueled by natural gas delivered by pipeline to North Carolina.

The pipeline will not be a lifeline for eastern North Carolina. It will instead delay Duke from more urgently converting to renewable sources. This is not a theoretical issue. Eastern North

Carolina has felt the flooding from hurricanes intensified by global warming, and it is feeling the encroachment of rising sea levels.

What's in eastern North Carolina's best interest with regard to energy sources is the same as what's in the world's best interest. Build more wind turbines and solar arrays and encourage the rapidly improving battery technology for storing solar power. Those steps – not running a 50-foot wide swath through eastern North Carolina for the pipeline – represent the best path for the state's energy future.